

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Following in the footsteps of former President Bill Clinton and this year's keynote, Senator Ted Kennedy, Representative Xavier Becerra (CA - 31) laid out his vision of the healthcare challenges and opportunities in the year ahead yesterday at the 2004 Families USA Health Action Conference.

The mission of Families USA's annual conference is to bring together progressive health advocates and people representing diverse constituencies - seniors, children, communities of color, labor, religious communities, people with disabilities, immigrants - concerned about health care. This year's gathering focused on several broad issues, including the future of Medicaid, recent federal Medicare and prescription drug legislation, private market and employer-provided health care, and state strategies for universal health care.

Rep. Becerra, the only congressional member from Southern California who is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, used Tuesday night's State of the Union address as the springboard for his remarks, expressing his belief that President Bush has not made our nation's healthcare woes a top priority.

"Tuesday night, the president laid out his vision for the future of America," Rep. Becerra said. "Solving our growing national healthcare crisis was not part of that agenda ... The president's plan includes \$1 trillion more in tax cuts, \$500 billion to send a human to Mars, but nothing to end disparities in healthcare quality and access, and only recycled, unworkable proposals to aid the uninsured ... Forty-four million Americans - eight million of whom are children - live without basic health insurance, and the president and this Republican-led Congress offer no real solutions to this problem ... By continuing to ignore this burgeoning health care crisis, the president is compromising the lives of millions of Americans whose only guilt is an inability to afford basic health insurance."

Rep. Becerra acknowledged, however, that the federal government must first put its fiscal house in order if it is to deal with the healthcare crisis head-on. "A \$5 trillion deficit over the next 10 years looms on the horizon," he said. "If we repeal the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, we would have the revenue to put our budget back into balance."